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Wheatmore's Tuggle plays through pain

BY JIMMY TOMLIN

TRINITY — Before their son Jake was born, Doug and Mandy Tuggle were just praying he would live: Longer than a day. Longer than a week. Longer than a year. And if he did live, they prayed he might walk — not run and jump and play, but just walk.

Eighteen years later, though, Jake finds himself headed to Pfeiffer University on a basketball scholarship, the ultimate underdog pulling off the upset.

“He’s a miracle to us,” Mandy says. “He’s been through so much.”

Jake’s inspiring story was recently shared during “HighSchoolOT Honors,” a one-hour television special recognizing outstanding high-school athletes in North Carolina. Jake, a graduating senior at Wheatmore High School, is one of five finalists for the annual Stuart Scott Courage Award, recognizing student-athletes who have overcome tremendous adversity and found ways to help others.

The award, sponsored by HighSchoolOT.com — a website dedicated to high-school sports in North Carolina — honors the memory of the late Stuart Scott, an ESPN sportscaster from this state who fought a long, courageous battle against cancer before his death in 2015.

Jake was nominated by his father, Doug, who also was his basketball coach at Wheatmore.

Jake’s journey of adversity began even before he was born. When Mandy was 15 weeks pregnant, doctors told her and Doug they believed Jake had Trisomy 13 or Trisomy 18, genetic disorders that would cause birth defects and developmental disabilities, and almost certainly cut his life short.

“Most of those children don’t live past birth, and if they do, it’s a very short life,”



File photo

Former Wheatmore High School basketball player Jake Tuggle, who will play at Pfeiffer University this fall, was a recent finalist for the Stuart Scott Courage Award.

Mandy says. “Every doctor we saw suggested the same thing — terminating the pregnancy.”

That was not an option, the Tuggles decided, and although it turned out Jake did not have Trisomy 13 or 18, he was born with severe bilateral club feet, a birth defect in which the feet are pointed inward and downward. He spent much of his early childhood in casts and braces, and he underwent

multiple surgeries, the first when he was only 7 months old.

When he was 5, Jake’s feet began to turn inward again, and he required a major surgery in which the doctors had to break both of his legs at the shins so they could set his feet forward again. That was followed by wearing casts up to his hips, going to kindergarten in a wheelchair, and then using a walker until his legs regained

their strength.

Like most boys his age, Jake was drawn to sports, but his leg braces presented a challenge. He enjoyed playing soccer, but he was repeatedly falling as he ran up and down the field. Finally, after being cleared by his doctors when he was 10, Jake pursued basketball. He obviously has thrived at that sport, but the success comes with a price — pain.

“I have nonstop pain in my feet every day,” Jake says. “When I play, I’m just playing, and I don’t think about the pain. But afterwards, that’s when it starts to kick in. I come home and ice my feet, and I’ve got a couple of massage chairs to get my muscles going.”

He often feels that pain when he wakes in the morning, too, requiring him to walk on his tiptoes until his muscles get stretched out.

The perseverance has paid off, though. After two good seasons at North Iredell High School his sophomore and junior years, and a strong senior season at Wheatmore, the shooting guard is headed to Pfeiffer this fall for what he hopes will be more success.

Off the court, Jake has become actively involved in Dream On 3, a nonprofit organization that grants once-in-a-lifetime sports dreams for students with disabilities. He’s currently working on a project to help Caleb Hill, a fellow student at Wheatmore, achieve his dream of meeting Tim Tebow. Some \$14,000 has been raised for the project thus far, and Jake hopes Caleb will get his chance to meet Tebow this summer or in the fall.

“It’ll be like a VIP experience for four or five days, just hanging out with Tim and experiencing the dream he wants,” Jake says. “Caleb is just a great kid who brings a smile to everybody’s face, so he deserves to get a chance like this.”